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ABSTRACT

This study presents the result of the Columbia-Greene Community College (New York) annual book use survey. The main purpose of the study was to determine which subject areas are most/least in demand, so that the library can acquire books to optimally meet actual demand. The library did a 12% arithmetic sample of the entire circulating collection. The acquisition year of the books in the collection was recorded, as well as the circulation history. In the sampling, the library recorded each piece of data for each book in the sample. Five graphs present the following data: (1) percent of books used at least once from January 1991 through June 1993, by year of acquisition; (2) average circulations per book from January 1991 through June 1993, by year of acquisition; (3) annual average circulations per book of 1977 acquisitions that were used in 1977 or 1978 versus those not used those first two years; (4) subsequent total circulations of 1977 acquisitions used versus unused in first years on shelf; and (5) percent of previously unused 1977 and 1978 acquisitions receiving their first ever use, by years on the shelf. (JLB)

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ED 366 339

The Use and Weeding of a Community College Book Collection

By

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You can weed unused new books after only 2 years and make few mistakes in the process. You need wait no longer. There is no magical number of years beyond which unused books will never be used. New books circulate more but previously used old books still circulate quite well even after 15 years. There is not much difference in all this between technical and non-technical books.

These things and more have proven out year after year as we have done our annual book use survey. The figures in the present study will be those of this year's survey but merely extend the findings of the earlier surveys. There is no fluke here.

Perhaps the findings will not prevail in your "different" library but we really doubt that C-GCC is all that different from other community college or undergraduate libraries. In any case, a similar survey of your own collection would tell the tale and we recommend it so you can know rather than believe.

The Study

Following our annual practice of the last 15 years or so we did a 12% arithmetic sample of the entire circulating collection. We had begun recording acquisition years in our books when the library was founded in 1969 and we have recorded circulation in our books since Jan. 1, 1977. In our sampling we record these for each book in the sample and the results

are what is shown here.

The main purpose of these studies is to tell us which subject areas are in most demand and which least, so that we can acquire books to optimally meet actual demand. We can, for example, tell that our criminology books circulate four times as often as our astronomy books and six times as often as those in political science, and we can buy new books accordingly. And yes, we can correct for age of books just in case this is a factor (it never is). These results are unique to our collection and clientele and will not be presented here as they would have zero value to you and your clientele. We just wanted you to know why we do all this sampling.

The Library

Columbia-Greene Community College is a small outfit with approximately half our graduates going on to four year schools. We have about 1500 fte students and a library staff of 5, including two professionals. We are a print-only library with the A-V stuff taken care of elsewhere. Our collection consists of about 700 current subscriptions (most microfilm-only) and 45,000 volumes. We add about 1600 books a year and have never weeded the collection. That last is important to what follows since it means we are not dealing with just "successful" books. Theft, as determined by survey, is less than 1% of all acquisitions, ever. The collection has about doubled in size since 1977

but the book circulation level has always bounced around 20,000. We define "circulation" as books actually charged out of the library and only that is recorded in the books. As an aside, with rare exceptions we find the books used in the library are the same ones patrons charge out of the library. Of the 20,000 circulations a year, about 8,000 go to members of the general public. Adults in our counties are eligible for borrowing cards but we do not buy books aimed at them. We do not buy books to support faculty or administrative research either.

The Results

Graphs 1&2

It comes as no surprise that newer books circulate most and graphs 1&2 illustrate this. Whether we look at the percent of available books that were used at least once in the last 2½ years or the circulation per book in those 2½ years, new books are clearly preferred even by our relatively unsophisticated community college patrons. Since most of our books get plastic covers and look new for many years, that means our patrons know how to find copyright dates (in fact we teach them how). Because of the 2½ year period the most recent acquistions show declines simply because they were not on the shelf the entire period. Had we used just the latest full year of circulation, the books acquired that year would have been the top of the chart. People really like new books and the

newer the better.

What is surprising is that the drop in popularity is very steep in the first five years or so, then the decline becomes much slower and finally almost levels off with books over 20 years old still experiencing respectable circulation. Also surprising is that non-technical classes show essentially the same pattern as the fiction/technical classes of books. Even the History and English Lit. types prefer new books by a large margin.

Graph 3

We isolated only those books acquired in 1977, the first for which we have the entire circulation record in the books. We then separated them into two groups: those that circulated at least once in 1977 or 1978 and those that did not circulate in those two years. The graph shows the subsequent circulations of the two groups. Clearly the first two years on the shelf are accurate predictors of circulation over the long term. By 1993, after 16 years on the shelf, those used earliest in their careers were still experiencing more circulations that the unused cohort did when they were new.

Only 3% of those unused in the first two years achieved 10 circulations or more over the next 15 years, with the highest achieving 12. By contrast, 34% of those used in the first two years achieved ten or more subsequent circulations and 11% even got to 20 or more. The median for the used group turned out

to be seven subsequent circulations, meaning half achieved that level, but only 7% of the unused group got that high.

Graph 4

This graph shows the total circulations that would have been "lost" had we just thrown out all the 1977 books not used in the first two or three years on the shelf. Had we chucked those not used in 1977 or 1978 we'd have "lost" only 15% of subsequent circulations and if we'd waited one more year to discard, we'd have been down to only 11%. We intuit (we can't prove this) that we actually would have lost far less. Patrons would generally have simply taken out books we hadn't chucked instead.

The lesson of graphs 3 and 4 is that we need not wait years and years before weeding unused books. Getting rid of the ones not used in the first few years will result in relatively few "lost" circulations. Put in gross terms, our "winners" prove themselves early on and there are darned few "late bloomers".

Graph 5

The flip side of all this is shown on this graph. What is shown is only the "first use" of 1977 and 1978 acquisitions, year by year on the shelf. Fully 46% were used first during their acquisition year. Of those still unused, 32% were used for the first time in the following year, and of those still unused 14% were first used the next year and so on. Note that

from year five onwards we are in about the 5% to 10% range and we stay there. There simply is no magical number of years after which it becomes safe to weed because no one will ever use that book. Had we, for example, weeded those books unused after 15 years on the shelf, we'd have been "wrong" on 4% of them the very next year, and counting.

So for those who agonize over weeding and fear the book weeded today will be just the one wanted tomorrow, there is a slim chance you are right. And those who thought there was some magical number of years after which weeding was safe, are wrong. That's a fact.

Throughout this report we have mostly used the 1977 books simply because they have the longest track record. There was nothing unusual about the books we acquired that year and the identical results would be obtained if we looked at books acquired in 1980 or 1989 or any other year. We know that because we tried it. Again, there is no fluke here.

Opinion

So far we've used fact only. Now I get to opinionate with things I cannot prove. First let me say I see no reason to weed collections just for the sake of doing so. It takes time and it upsets people to no useful purpose, if you have lots of shelf space. However, I also firmly believe that once shelving

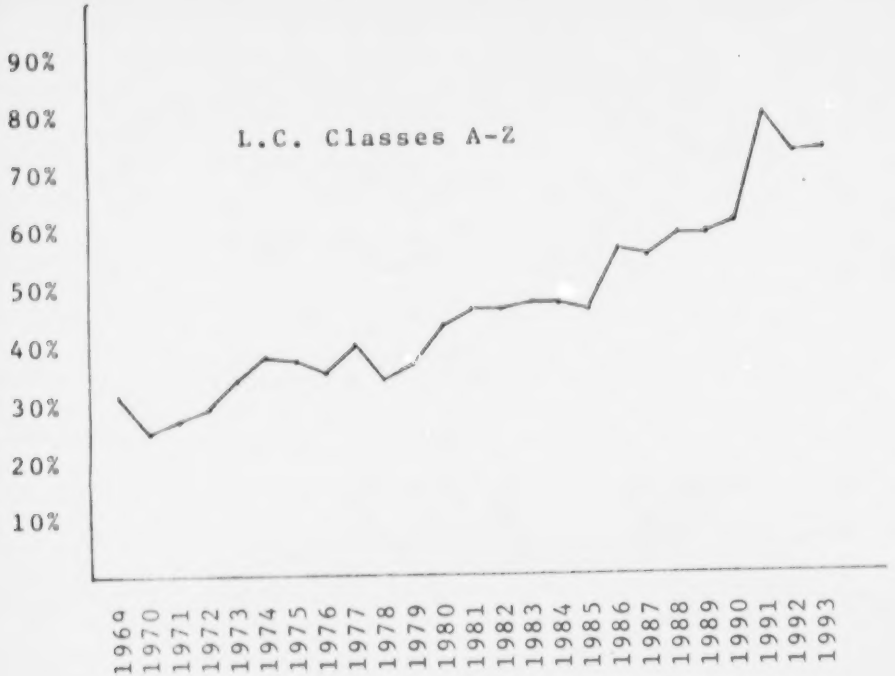
gets more than about 2/3 full, it "turns off" undergraduates. They simply become intimidated by that solid wall of books. Check your own inner feelings when faced with truly full shelves and see what I mean. On the other hand, give them shelves half full or less and they feel like they had better grab a piece of this attractive and scare resource, and circulation goes up.

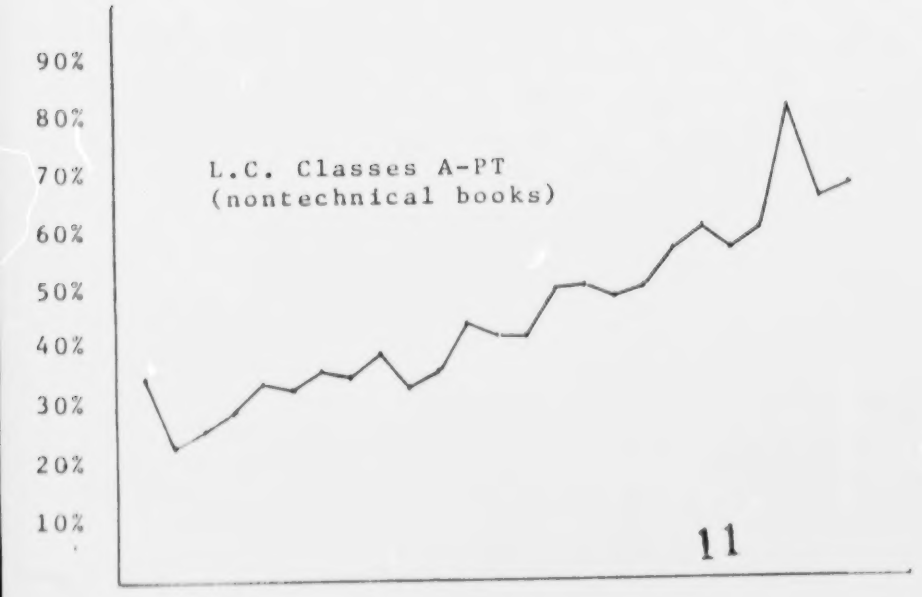
But even if you disagree with this 2/3 business, unless you can infinitely expand your library, sooner or later you have to weed because you are shifting more and more to gain less and less space. The foregoing study shows which books to begin with and then the next priority and so on up the ladder. As graph 5 shows there is no way you can weed and not be "wrong" on some of your choices, but as the rest of the graphs show, it isn't hard to be "right" almost all of the time. If you are really cramped for space you don't even have to wait many years to chuck out even new acquisitions that have not been used.

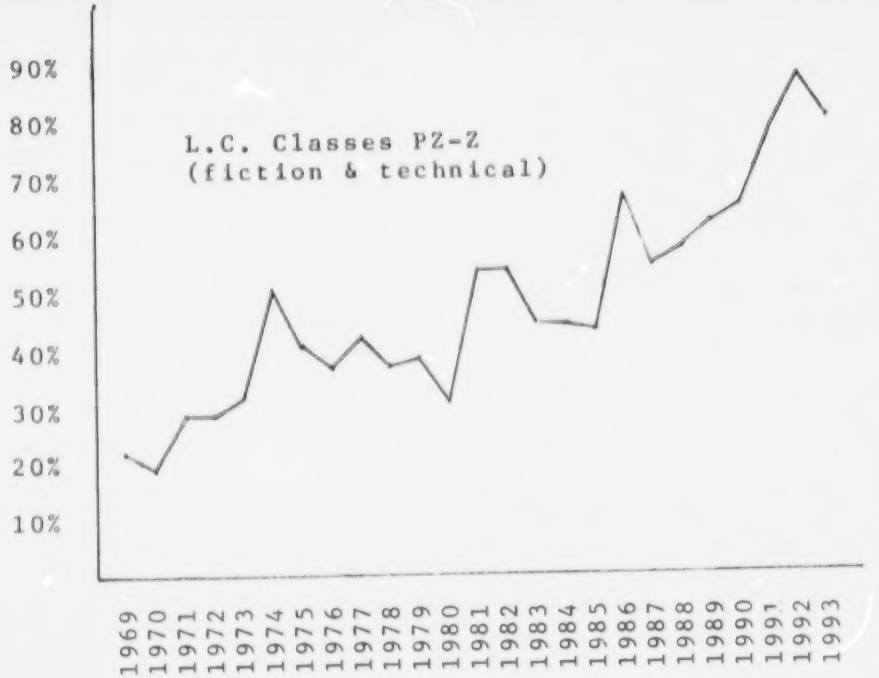
My managerial opinion is that you should not wait until the situation is drastic and then make a big thing of weeding. Do it year by year as a normal part of operations and it will take less staff and cause less trouble. You don't buy books in great gulps, why weed that way?

One last notion. I've heard talk all of my career about the need for "judgement" in weeding, that only librarians and committees can supply that judgement, etc. I even used to believe it. The simple fact is that if our judgement was all that great those unused books would not have been acquired in

the first place. The only reason requiring librarians, or worse, committees of librarians, to exercise "Judgement" will work is that they will weed far fewer books, and thus create less space as well as making fewer "mistakes". I think it better and more practical to be humble and let the student aides do the weeding. Just tell them to pick all the books that were acquired over X years ago and used fewer than Y times. They'll be "wrong" only about as often as you or your committee would have been, and they are young and quick and work cheap. Use the librarian time you save to get to some faculty members and convince them to give library assignments to their students, and maybe teach a class to those students, or just work with students one-on-one and make them feel librarians really help and libraries really work. We are in the education business after all, not the book preservation business.





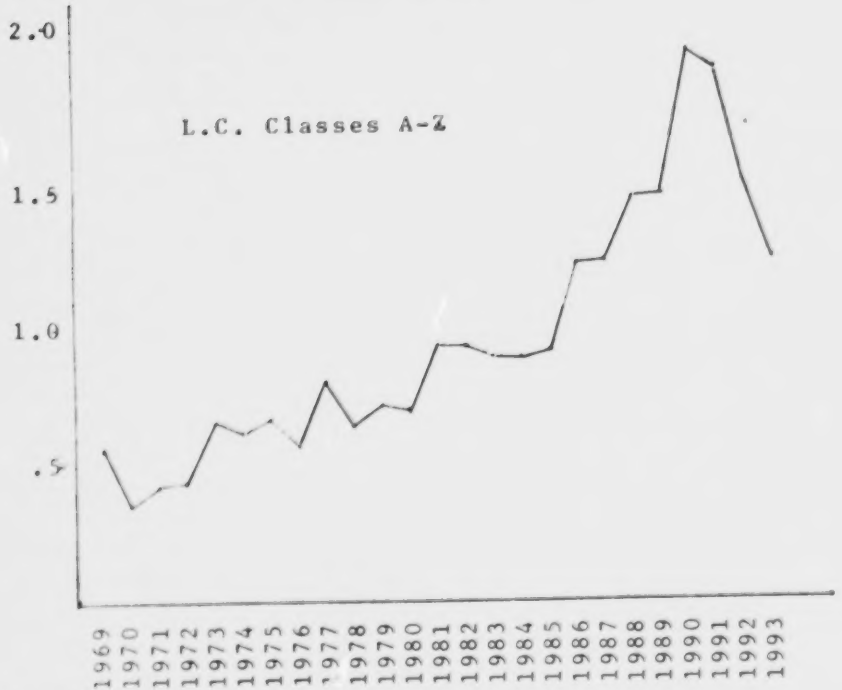


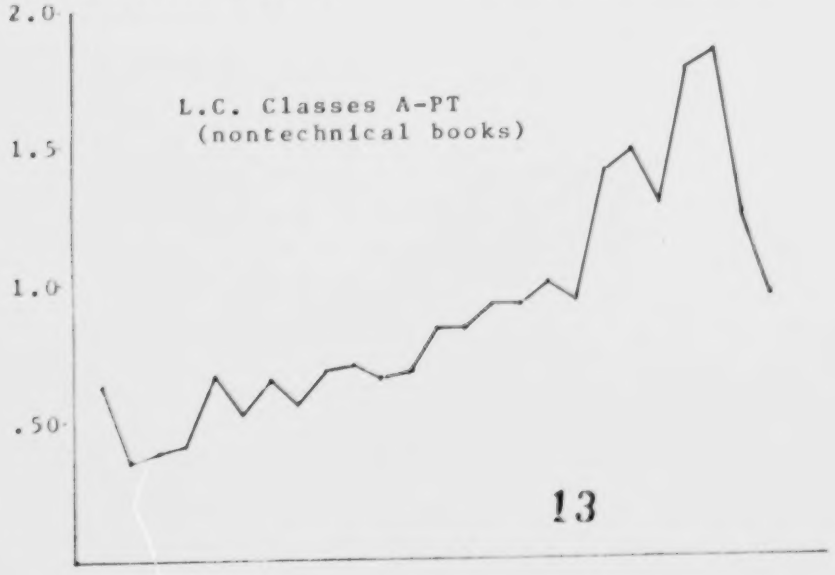
GRAPH # 1

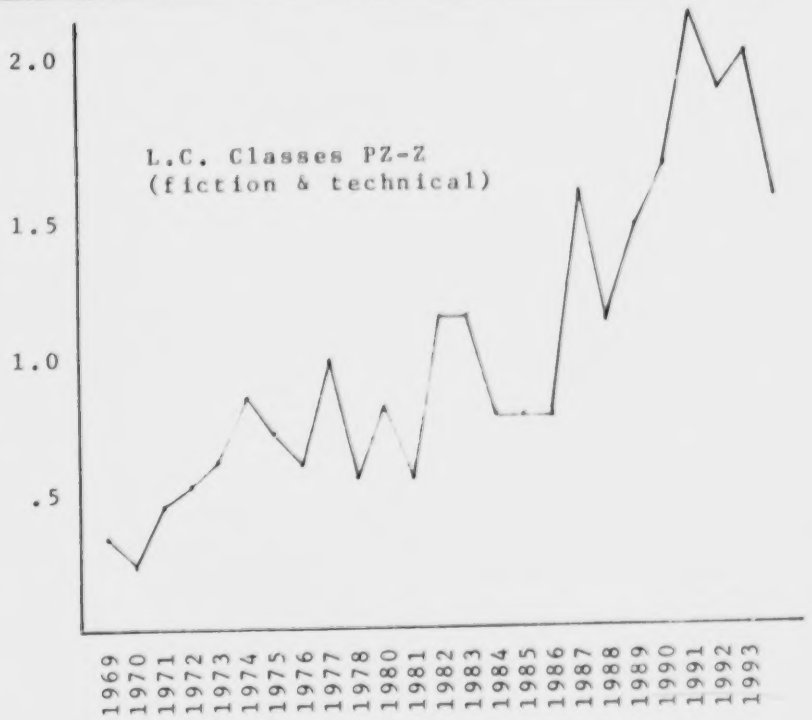
Percent of books used at least once in the 2½ years from Jan. 1991 through June 1993, by year of acquisition.

Note that 1991, 1992 and 1993 books had progressively less than the full 2½ years in which to circulate.

The raggedness of the graphs is due to each being a subsample of a small collection.







GRAPH # 2

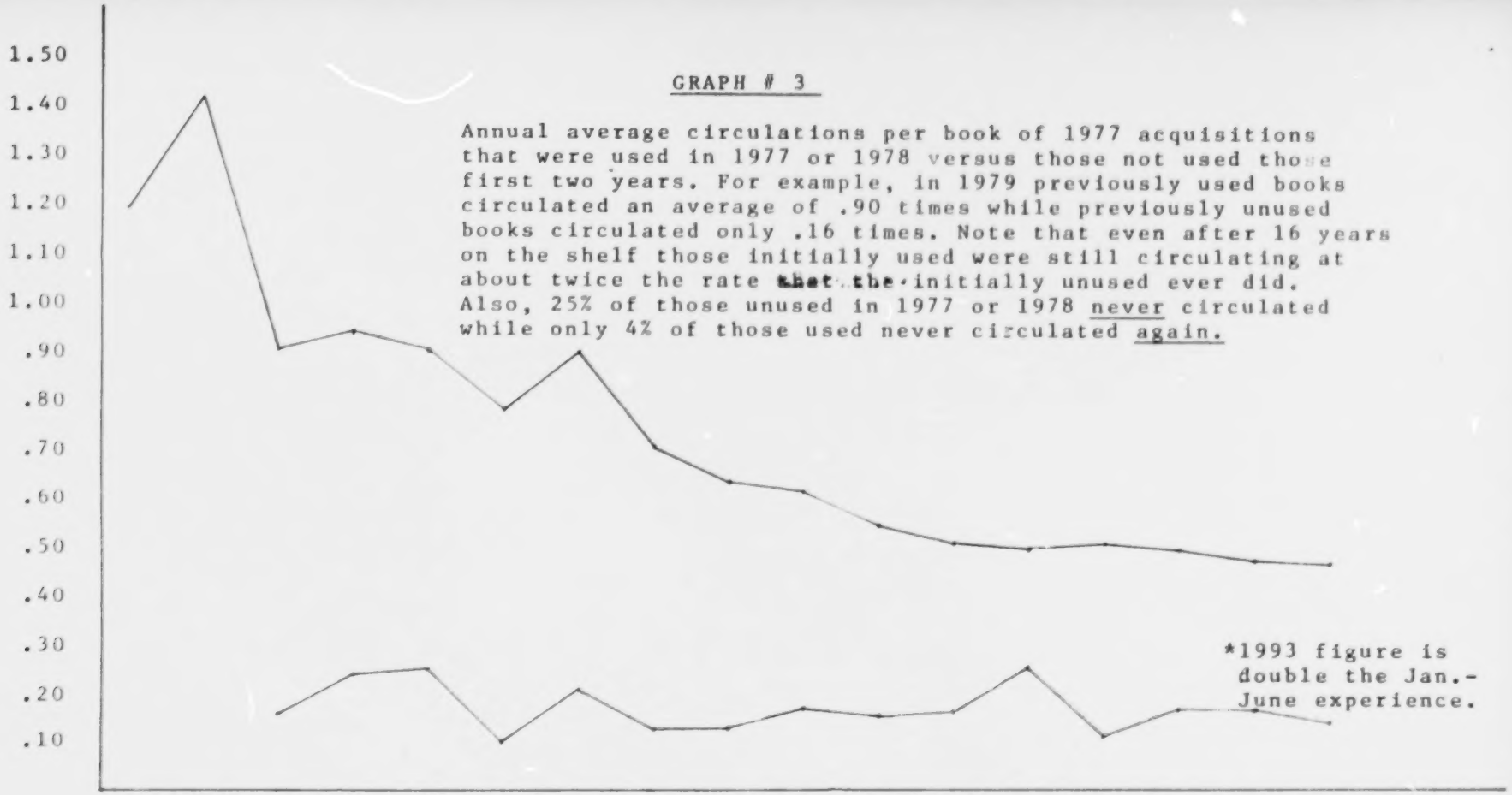
Average circulations per book in the 2½ years from Jan. 1991 through June 1993, by year of acquisition.

Note that 1991,1992 and 1993 books had progressively less than the full 2½ years in which to circulate.

The raggedness of the graphs is due to this being a subsample of a small collection.

GRAPH # 3

Annual average circulations per book of 1977 acquisitions that were used in 1977 or 1978 versus those not used those first two years. For example, in 1979 previously used books circulated an average of .90 times while previously unused books circulated only .16 times. Note that even after 16 years on the shelf those initially used were still circulating at about twice the rate that the initially unused ever did. Also, 25% of those unused in 1977 or 1978 never circulated while only 4% of those used never circulated again.

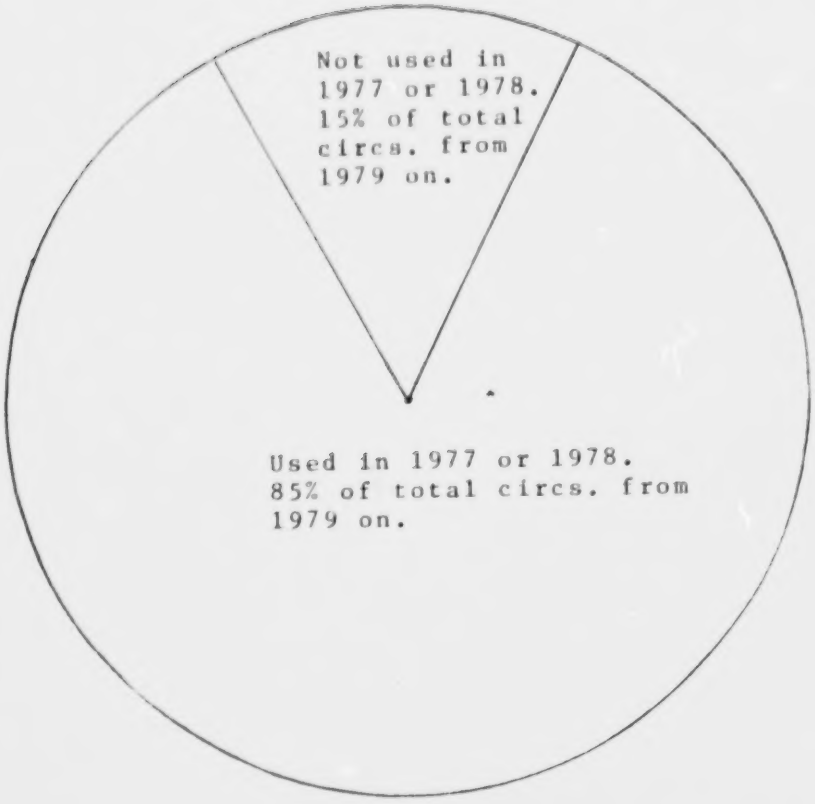


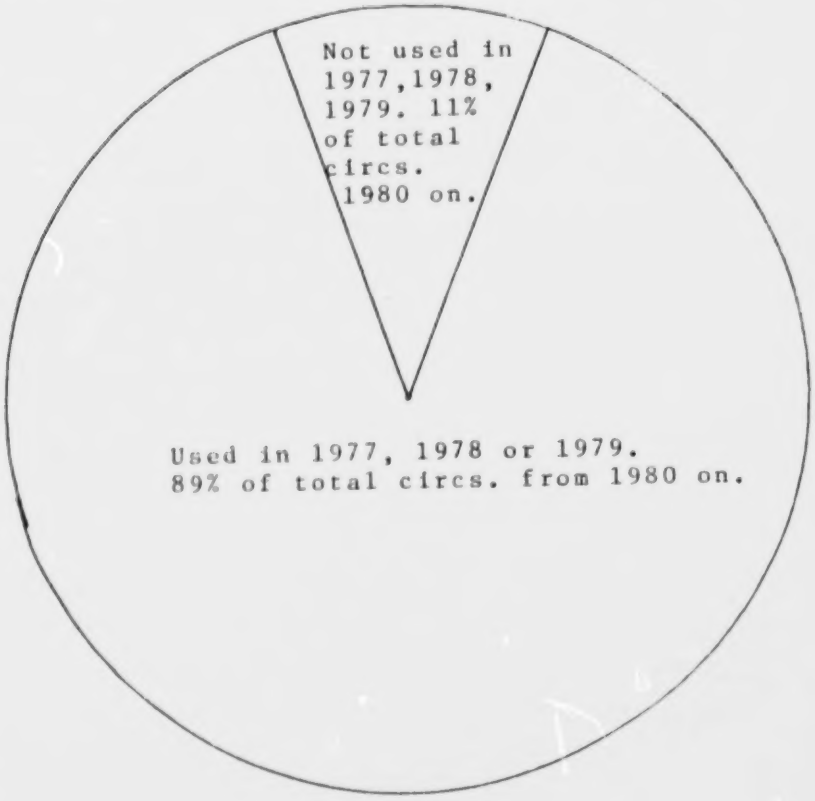
*1993 figure is double the Jan.-June experience.

	1977	1978	1979	1980	1981	1982	1983	1984	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989	1990	1991	1992	1993*
	1.19	1.42	.90	.94	.90	.78	.90	.70	.63	.61	.54	.50	.49	.50	.49	.47	.46
0		0	.16	.24	.25	.10	.21	.13	.13	.17	.15	.16	.25	.11	.17	.17	.14

GRAPH # 4

Subsequent total circulations of 1977 acquisitions, used versus unused in first years on shelf.





GRAPH # 5

Percent of previously unused 1977 & 1978 acquisitions receiving their first ever use, by years on the shelf. For example, of the books still never used, 6% were used for the first time in their 10th year on the shelf.